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# **(Un)making ‘extreme’ and ‘ordinary’ whiteness: activists’ narratives on antiracist mobilisation in Finland**

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## **Introduction**

Scholars in the growing field of the critical theorisation of racism and antiracism have repeatedly voiced concerns over narrow interpretations of racism that only connect it to extremist forms (eg Gilroy, 1990; Goldberg, 2009; Lentin, 2016). In this article, I combine this observation with conceptual tools provided by critical whiteness analysis, and explore antiracist activist engagement that positions itself as counter to anti-immigration racist mobilisation and the far and extreme right’s racism in Finland. In other words, while anti-immigration racist mobilisation—often connected to the far and extreme right and right-wing populism—has been under extensive academic scrutiny for several years in Europe (eg Grimm & Pilkington, 2015; Keskinen, 2013; Mäkinen, 2017), this article sets the focus on counter-reactions provoked by growing support for explicit expressions of white supremacy (cf Fella & Ruzza, 2013).

The analysis draws on empirical data on grassroots antiracist activism. I analyse perspectives and agencies that the antiracist mobilisation narrative (cf Polletta, 2006) prioritises. Here, the conceptual division between ‘extreme whiteness’ and ‘ordinary whiteness’ (Dyer, 1997) allows for scrutinising the ways in which, on the one hand, antiracism that aims to work against far and extreme right racism implicitly affirms white-normativity, and on the other hand, wields the potential to destabilise the norm. The data for this study was gathered in Finland between 2014 and 2015, and comprises grassroots antiracist discussions, interviews with antiracist activists, participant observations of events, and texts produced by activists.

Exploring whiteness and antiracism in Finland also provides an opportunity to theorise antiracism in a context where racism’s historical heritages manifest in particular ways that are distinct from other Western European countries (cf Higgs, 2016; Lentin, 2004; Pitcher, 2009), not to mention the North American or South African contexts that are usually invoked within antiracism analyses. Hence, while the article contributes sociological work on the challenges whiteness poses to antiracist critique (eg Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Ahmed, 2012), it also illustrates antiracist debate in a context where historically, struggles against racism have mobilised limited amounts of people, and gained relatively little visibility in the public debate, in comparison to the contexts often highlighted in analyses of antiracism.

The article argues that anti-fascist antiracism’s potential to address racism—beyond being understood as exceptional—depends on its capability to comprehend extreme and ordinary whiteness as interrelated parts of the same power-structure. In other words, the analysis highlights the connective threads between extreme and ordinary whiteness, or the porousness of such a distinction. In the following, I first discuss critical analyses of racism and antiracism, together with critical theorisations of whiteness. I will then address some specificities of discussions about racism and antiracism in Finland, after which the data and method are introduced. The analysis of the

antiracist mobilisation narrative is divided into three sections. First, I discuss how notions of exceptionality shape the foundations of the narrative; then I analyse the plot-structure that centres the conflict between ‘racists’ and antiracists; and lastly, I extrapolate upon perspectives that contest white normativity.

## **Theorising antiracism and whiteness**

The theoretical point of departure for my analysis is to combine critical analyses of racism and antiracism, with critical theorisations of whiteness. Theorisation of racism and antiracism has repeatedly drawn attention to the scope of different antiracist analyses and strategies for action (eg Ahmed, 2012; Gilroy, 1990; Lentin, 2016; Pitcher, 2009). While the label ‘antiracism’ can be used to refer to multiple practices (eg Bonnett 2005), the critical analyses I refer to focus on certain antiracist approaches. For instance, anti-fascist antiracist approaches have been critiqued for reproducing an exceptionalist image of racism as ‘on the fringes of political culture’ (Gilroy, 1990, p. 252; see also Goldberg, 2009) and thus, overlooking patterns of racist practice in the mainstream. Furthermore, critical theorisations of antiracism have argued that certain discussions and practices that label themselves antiracist might overlap with narratives that repeatedly invoke racism as an exception (for example, as isolated and extremist events, or as derivative from ‘extraordinary’ behaviour), while everyday practices that reproduce racialised hierarchies—which are in turn upheld by the white majority population and/or state institutions—might not be easily recognised as racism (eg Lentin, 2016; Goldberg, 2009).

I suggest that discussions on the scope of different antiracist approaches overlap with analytical distinctions made in the field of critical whiteness studies, and that what is common to discussions and practices using the label antiracist—and critiqued because of their limited definitions of racism—is that they fail to systematically address whiteness as the power-structure racism leans on (cf Ahmed, 2012). Previous research—which interrogates the analytical vocabulary of whiteness—points out that some antiracist approaches are bound by an unacknowledged commitment to whiteness. Hesse (2007) critiques the early twentieth century ‘antiracist’ debates on race for including only the voices of white elites. For him, the discussions in which ‘the viewpoints, critiques, and experiences of “nonwhites” were largely irrelevant to the proceedings’ are representative of Western white supremacy. Hage’s (2000) analysis of whiteness in Australia indicates that condemning anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism racism ultimately reinforces a fantasy of a white nation. Hughey (2012) finds that despite their antithetical politics, white antiracist activists and advocates of white nationalism in the United States are bound by a similar ideal of white identity in the social reality. In France, Bouteldja (2014) points out that public reactions to the extreme right’s violent offences vary according to the victims’ racialised positions. For her, an antiracism focusing solely on the fight against the ultra-right is incapable of building an alliance ‘with those who bear the brunt of racism’ (ibid). In the Nordic context, Hübinette and Lundström (2011) have argued that extreme right racism and antiracism manifest a similar melancholic longing for an imaginary conflict-free, homogenous, and white past for the Swedish nation-state. In other words, a (supposedly) unconscious or unintentional commitment to whiteness could be understood as the broader structure that racism-as-exception fails to take into account.

Whiteness here refers to a structure of power and privilege constituting multiple attributes (Hage, 2000), which also means that whiteness (as well as other positions in the racialised order) should

not simply be reduced to bodily features. And yet, as the effects of whiteness as a structure become tangible in relation to bodies that either pass as white or do not, whiteness becomes both a social structure *and* an embodied position within this overlapping structure. Further, classed and gendered divisions (among others) shape the racialised order dominated by whiteness. For instance, accusations of racism have often been proven to imply a classed structure, as racism is associated with the working class and/or an underclass (Lawler, 2012; Mäkinen, 2015). When the figure of ‘the racist’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 149–50) is seen as the source of racism, this relies on a classed image of whiteness. Mäkinen’s (2015, p. 11) observations situate this discussion in the context of Finland. According to her, in Finnish public debates, anti-immigration racism is often perceived as ‘a deficit of certain “lower” people’ who are constantly made into an object of ridicule and disgust.

One analytical distinction that can be used to explicate variations within whiteness is distinguishing between ‘extreme whiteness’ and ‘ordinary whiteness’—or more accurately, ‘whiteness as ordinariness’—developed by Dyer (1997), and followed by Lawler (2012). Extreme whiteness here refers to blatant expressions of racism—or of white supremacy—that stand out against the backdrop of white ordinariness (Dyer, 1997; Lawler, 2012, p. 410). Whiteness as ordinariness in turn refers to a universalising, supposedly unmarked categorisation that reproduces racialised divisions by working through silent assumptions (Lawler, 2012, p. 419). In other words, distinguishing between the two can clarify how whiteness perceived to be exceptional masks a more overarching normative whiteness, that also reduces non-whiteness into a particularity.

In the analysis, I make use of the distinction between extreme and ordinary whiteness as a descriptive tool. Ultimately, the distinction critiques the partial recognition of whiteness, as it is more often recognised in its extreme forms. Hence, rather than assuming that extreme and ordinary whiteness would exist as two separate entities, this conceptualisation allows for analysing the discursive processes through which this distinction is made. It has been shown to become recognisable through attributes of class (Lawler, 2012), or invocations of death and violence (Dyer, 1997). Therefore, the boundary between the extreme and the ordinary is likely to be as shifting and porous as any cultural classification. Taking into account the overarching structure of whiteness, I maintain that analyses of extreme and ordinary whiteness can also shift the focus to processes in which these distinctions are contested, or even dismantled. At the same time, the distinction does little to provide researchers with the tools to see beyond whiteness, as it simply describes the forms that whiteness is perceived to take. Nonetheless, the analytical distinction that points to a tendency to distinguish extreme whiteness from ordinariness resembles an observation made in the theorisation of antiracism—that is, a focus on extremes. In other words, an analytical breakdown of whiteness provides an opportunity to look into how hierarchies of whiteness shape perceptions of racism, and furthermore, how to identify when antiracist analyses become blinkered. Simultaneously, it serves to locate antiracist conceptualizations that seek to deconstruct power and privilege entrenched (also) in narratives of ordinary whiteness.

## **Racism and antiracism in the Finnish context**

It has been remarked upon previously that racism is a theme that is difficult to address in Finnish society (Tuori, 2009), but the discursive landscape around racism has recently changed. A persistent belief that Finland has existed ‘outside of racist histories and pasts’ (ibid., p. 20) still shapes much of the context within which contemporary antiracist activism operates. Similar to

other Nordic countries, a false image of a white and homogenous nation—maintained through excluding the histories of minorities and their struggles—has been particularly hard to dislodge from the metanarratives within the nation state discourses. Furthermore, a historical commitment to fascism ‘has been practically framed out from Finnish history’ (Silvennoinen, Tikka & Roselius, 2016, p. 18–23), and it has been controversially suggested that in the Finnish context, the political commitment to racial hygiene was not racist (see Urponen, 2010, p. 108–9). This has enabled the imagining of a position of innocence in regards to the racialised hierarchies present in other Nordic societies as well (Mulinari, Keskinen, Irni & Tuori, 2009). The Finnish case is at times portrayed as exceptional, even in the Nordic context, since in the post-second world war era, migration to Finland only started to increase in the 1990s, and it remains moderate in comparison to its Nordic neighbours. Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that previous research has repeatedly found that ‘racism is not talked about’, and it has been noted that there is an absence of recognised, strong antiracist traditions (Tuori, 2009, p. 75 and 165).

During the past ten years, racism has become increasingly discussed and debated, particularly in connection to far and extreme right. Since the mid-2000s, the pan-European anti-immigration racist agenda has been disseminated by the right-wing populists (eg Horsti, 2015; Keskinen, 2013; Mäkinen, 2017), and a variety of coinciding antiracist initiatives (Seikkula, 2019) have at least occasionally moved racism to the spotlight within public debate.

Anti-immigration racist views first became largely noted—and at least to some extent, contested—in connection to the elections in 2008 and 2009, as an anti-immigration racist agenda was particularly cultivated in campaigning by the right-wing populist True Finns, but also by politicians from all the largest political parties (Keskinen, 2013, p. 23). Concomitantly, anti-immigration racism was not absent from the mainstream media either (Horsti, 2015). Yet, especially after the True Finns’ electoral victory in 2011, blatant anti-immigration and anti-Muslim racist argumentation (alongside misogyny and homophobia) framed the party members and their supporters as occupying the position of ‘the racists’ in the public imagination (Mäkinen, 2015; Horsti, 2015). This has also provoked antiracist counter-reactions in civil society beyond party politics—for instance, antiracists have made an effort to expose online racist speech to the general public (Horsti, 2015).

A simultaneous and partly overlapping development taking place alongside the mainstreaming of parliamentary anti-immigration racism has been the emergence of non-parliamentary extreme right groups (cf. Mäkinen 2017). Although this has been accounted for less in public debate, violent neo-Nazi and other white supremacist groups have gained a stronger foothold in Finland since the beginning of the 2010s. They have become an increasing concern for leftist and anarchist grassroots groups, in particular.

During the data gathering period for this study, the landscape of antiracism developed further. First, in late summer of 2015, an unforeseen series of demonstrations under the name ‘We have a dream’ [*Meillä on unelma*] mobilised a relatively large number of people as a response to a social media update by a True Finns member of parliament, who urged constituents to fight against a ‘multicultural nightmare’. The demonstrations encouragement for dialogue with ‘the racists’ was also critiqued, which in part underscores the ambiguity in understandings of antiracism and racism within Finnish society. Secondly, in the autumn of 2015, the increased number of people seeking asylum in Finland were met with ‘Close the borders’ [*Rajat Kiinni*] rallies, extreme right street-patrols, and violent attacks (eg arson attempts) against reception centres, among other acts (Mäkinen, 2017). This heightened anti-immigration racist mobilisation also provoked counter-actions, such as counter-demonstrations. Simultaneously, although racist and misogynist hate speech

has been condemned across the political spectrum, racism and antiracism have been repeatedly counterposed as ‘the two extremes’ in political debate.

## **Data and methodology**

The mobilisation narrative I explore relates to antiracist initiatives that address racism as a rudimentary part of far and extreme right mobilisation, and right-wing populist anti-immigration racism; they follow, for instance, Bonnett’s (2005) classification of antiracism that could be labelled as anti-Nazi and anti-fascist antiracism. At the same time, distinct approaches that enunciate such antiracist critique can be further articulated.

The different antiracist initiatives included in the data do not oppose the far and extreme right’s racism univocally. Instead, distinct initiatives could be described along the spectrum from radical to moderate<sup>i</sup>; while in the more moderate initiatives, the focus is a straightforward critique against the racism put forward by anti-immigration activists from the far and extreme right, initiatives at the radical end of the spectrum connect it to a broader set of phenomena that penetrate society more insidiously. Differences in perspectives have to do with, among other things, a commitment to political ideologies—some initiatives sprout from the anarchist movement, while others are advanced supporters of liberal democracy. However, in the data explored here, interviewees from both anarchist and democratic initiatives share similar concerns over the spread of anti-immigration racism in party politics, for instance.

From the perspective of critically analysing whiteness, there are evident similarities within distinct antiracist approaches against anti-immigration racism, which are the focus of the analysis at hand. Therefore, I will not discuss the differences of the antiracist initiatives examined here, but will rather focus more on their commonalities as an attempt to form a counterforce to the far and extreme right’s racism.

This study covers a spectrum of interventions that range from calling out politicians who have made blatantly racist statements and/or have connections to extra-parliamentary extremist groups on social media, to direct action that aims to disturb extreme right mobilisation on the streets. The data constitutes semi-structured interviews with activists; participant observations of demonstrations and discussion events; non-participant observations of one online group used for planning and information sharing; and the manifestos of two antiracist and anti-fascist networks—the aforementioned Varis, a direct-action anti-fascist network that established itself for the general public in early 2014, and Paljastettu, an online advocacy group active between 2011 and 2015.

The data was gathered between 2014 and 2015. Participant observations were conducted in 2015 in the three biggest cities in Finland, and the interviews were conducted from 2014 to 2015, with the exception of one interview being conducted in 2016. The interviews were conducted both individually (11) and in pairs (5), and in one case, in a group of three.<sup>ii</sup> In the interviews, I asked questions about the participants’ motivations for antiracist activism; their views on racism, antiracism, and the political project they were contributing to; their antiracist collaborators; and the political context in which they are working. In regards to the rest of the data, I was interested in similar descriptions of motivations, causalities, and agencies portrayed—for instance, in demonstration speeches, or leaflet handouts.

The analysis is grounded in an understanding that narratives as a discursive form have a crucial role in the constitution of social movements, as well as in mobilisation efforts that never grow into movements (Polletta, 2006). Activists tell stories to persuade others of their cause, but stories also

help us to make sense of random events. As a result, social injustices and mobilisations become intelligible thorough narrative elements.

In the analysis of the transcribed interviews, my notes from observations, and other texts included in the data, I focus on narrative elements of plot and characters (McKernan, 2018). In other words, I have identified the overarching focus-directing structures, and examined roles given to different figures in the narrative (who appear as the prominent actors; whose agency is portrayed as central). Furthermore, I have paid attention to the ways in which the narrative constructs its sociocultural surroundings—worldviews, characters, and events it constructs (Phoenix, 2013). These elements of the mobilisation narrative are discussed further with the help of theorisations of racism and antiracism, and critical whiteness analysis.

The analysis of whiteness is not a straightforward task. On one hand, in Finland the term ‘whiteness’ is rarely explicitly invoked (Kolehmainen, 2017), or it is understood through its negation, the naming of the non-white (Krivonos, 2018). This indeed makes whiteness an unmarked category that escapes naming (Lawler, 2012, p. 419), or at most, comprehensible only as an extreme. Therefore, an analysis of the white underpinnings of a collective narrative requires a focus on the unsaid, and thus it differs from analyses grounded in explicit white identifications, like Hughey’s (2012, p. 185) work on ‘white similarities across a racist and antiracist divide’ in the United States. On the other hand, racialised differences are often addressed through the euphemistic distinction between ‘Finns’ and ‘immigrants’, and therefore Finnishness is conflated with whiteness. In general, racialised differences are for the most part not explicitly reflected in the data. For instance, in regards to the interview data, the majority (19 of 24) of interviewees identify as white Finns like myself, while five of the interviewees belonged to visible minorities in Finland. The way in which this was articulated by the interviewees was mainly as the difference between people who ‘look like Finns’, and those ‘who look like immigrants or foreigners’.

The significance of white-normativity, or whiteness as ordinariness, also lies in the ways it shapes perceptions beyond such explicit categorisations. It might mean that, among other things, the agency of those who do not fit within the norms of whiteness are overlooked; in other words, all stories are not equally intelligible, and the authority ascribed to narratives depends on who tells the story, and within which context it is told (Polletta, 2006). To highlight this, I also focus on perspectives (and agencies) excluded from the antiracist mobilisation narrative. Simultaneously, to analyse whiteness also means placing the focus on what is already centralised (although perhaps left unnamed), which might as such enforce the centrality of whiteness. However, I maintain that making visible the (race-related) norms in antiracism is possible only through an analysis that discusses customarily highlighted perspectives.

Although my analysis focuses on the racialised positions constructed in the narrative (and not those of the interviewees), I have specified their identifications in regards to this, as well as gender, age, and the kinds of activities the interviewees carry out, while being conscious not to jeopardise their anonymity.

## **Two modes of exceptionality**

Conceptions of racism that link it exclusively to the far and extreme right have been critiqued for portraying racism as an exception (see Pitcher, 2009, p. 24; Lentin, 2008; Goldberg, 2009). In approaching the data, I start by exploring the consequences of linking racism strictly to the far and

extreme right. On one hand, the beginning of the story leans on the idea of exception, as events begin to unravel because of a natural-disaster-like emergence of the anti-immigration mobilisation. On the other hand, the interviewees rearticulate exceptionality, as they stress a public ignorance of the emergence and support of the far and extreme right. As I will explain in more detail, these two modes of exceptionality relate to whiteness and white-normativity in distinct ways.

### The surge of racism—a disaster-like change

The point of departure in interviewees' stories of their activism, as well as stories shared through speeches and manifestos, is the rise of racism commensurate with the rise of the far and extreme right<sup>iii</sup>, and how antiracism appears as a response to this development. 'A gloomy surge of intolerance, nationalism and explicit racism'<sup>iv</sup> identified in a campaign manifesto by Paljastettu (2014); or interviewees' descriptions of 'an avalanche of racist scum'; or the rise of 'Nazism, just like in [the] 1930s''; depict a sudden and severe change—a repeated concern raised in interviews was, 'where is this going to lead to', or 'what is going to happen to this country'. The descriptions of natural-disaster-like change, as well as echoes from 1930s Europe, and born-again illiberal ideologies, imply danger; in the latter case, they invoke historical horrors of a period that is almost universally condemned (Lentin, 2016, p. 35).

Racism as a part of the far and extreme right agenda appears as a temporal disruption, as metaphors of natural disaster and reincarnation—as well as the exceptionality they portray—rely on an earlier time. As one interviewee put it, there was a time when 'racists and fascist were at the margins', or when they were simply not a concern. Antiracist attachments to a previous, supposedly racism-free era have been analysed as 'melancholic nostalgia' that feeds on the false image of a homogenous, problem-free, white nation state (Hübinette and Lundström, 2011). Yet, it would be reductive to argue that the antiracist narrative observed here simply reproduces an attachment to an imaginary historical white nation-state. On one hand, the antiracist portrayal of a racism that echoes 1930s sentiments implies that the Nazi Holocaust set the standard for recognising contemporary racism, and as such, relies on the metanarrative of European racism (Hesse, 2007; Lentin, 2008; Goldberg, 2009) in which history provides examples of both a story of pre-second world war racist disaster, and the post-second world war defeat of it. On the other hand, the concern over an anachronistic outburst of a supposedly defeated ideology stresses both a current state of exception, and also a possible future dystopia. Yet, invoking the idea of exceptionality requires ordinariness or normativity—and, as the following analysis of events through which the disaster-like change is exemplified also shows, the portrayal of disaster works to recentre unmarked white ordinariness (Lawler, 2012).

The surge or avalanche culminates in certain key events—episodes that become canonical as they are repeatedly commemorated in antiracist discussions. While the far and extreme right's racism is generally acknowledged as a potentially dangerous and violent ideology, certain explicitly named events become reference points to justify antiracist mobilisation. The True Finns' electoral landslide, the party-members' out-right racist statements, and their support of non-parliamentary right-wing extremism, as well as the violence committed by the non-parliamentary extreme right, are among the most important points of reference to describe the changing socio-political context in Finland that also drives antiracist mobilisation.



Repeatedly commemorated events also work to highlight different characters' agencies and vulnerabilities in distinct ways. Also among the commemorated events are violent attacks from the non-parliamentary extreme right, like 'the Jyväskylä knife attack' and 'the gas attack against Dan Koivulaakso' that were reiterated several times in the data. For instance, Varis network describes its purpose by mentioning, among other things, that 'neo-Nazis have attacked – – against a discussion in Jyväskylä library, and against countless immigrants' (Varis, 2014). The incident at the City of Jyväskylä library in 2013, as well as the gas attack in 2011, refer to neo-Nazi group members' attacks against white, Finnish anti-fascist and antiracist activists, and left-wing politicians. At the same time, the unspecified violence 'against countless immigrants' appears in the background, but it does not constitute a similar tipping point in the narrative. As I will later show, a focus on white people's agency also marks the ways in which consecutive events in the narrative are told. However, as I will now discuss, the narrative also takes a critical stand in regards to white ordinariness.

### Exceptionality and ordinariness redefined

The antiracists' accounts of 'racists', as well as their own role, underscore a discrepancy between the antiracist mobilisation narrative and public debate, in a way that highlights connective threads between extreme and ordinary whiteness. First, while describing 'the racists', the interviewees stress how their views differed from the ones presented in public debate. 'Public opinion has been that racism is a problem to a minority or to those considered to be marginal, I don't mean the targets but the perpetrators', reflects Tuukka, a white male in his 20s, active in a radical antifascist network. The image of marginality attached to 'racists' is also observed in research. Depicting 'racists' as classed outcasts (Ahmed, 2012, p. 149–50; Pitcher, 2009, p. 13)—for instance as unrefined, peasant-like, redneck, vulgar, and uneducated, as Mäkinen (2015) describes when summarising Finnish discussions—enables the portrayal of racism as a quality inherent to the irrelevant margins of society.

On one hand, marginalising descriptions of 'racists' were also evoked in antiracist discussions—both interviews and demonstration speeches refer to 'tragicomic' and 'drunken' individuals, or 'feeble-minded losers who have low self-esteem'. In the online group I followed, anti-immigration debaters' bad spelling was framed as an indicator of lacking education or cognitive skills, and was constantly made fun of. On the other hand, while mocked and ridiculed, 'racists' were depicted as potentially influential and thus dangerous, as well as privileged members of society. For instance, the interviewees made remarks about neo-Nazis who have university degrees, and right-wing extremists who are 'well-off dudes'. Further, they explain that 'those who are most invested in spreading racism, they are doing well, working in [well] paid jobs', or in contrast to 1990s' school-bully skinheads, contemporary 'racists' are 'grown men in their 30s with families', and indisputably dangerous—a group that seeks 'uncontrollable, unmandated, and fascist power'. In other words, while ridiculed and undermined, 'racists' are seen as anything but irrelevant and marginal. Therefore, the observations of the grown-up school bullies and highly educated neo-Nazis demonstrate that ordinary and extreme whiteness are not easily distinguishable.

Furthermore, the True Finns' electoral landslide, and the party-members' outright racist statements and support of non-parliamentary right-wing extremism, are not only cited as specific examples of the worrisome and exceptional development of spreading racism, but also serve as examples of a

lack of public reaction against it. ‘It is such an exceptional situation in Finland. It seems that no-one cares that a representative from – – how large is the True Finns party now? – – [that an MP of the second largest political party] participates in a Nazi parade’, states interviewee Pii, a white, anarchist activist in their 20s, who describes reactions towards the rise of far-right anti-immigration racist mobilisation. This is not surprising, given that it has also been observed in research that, for instance, within mainstream media and parliamentary politics, (some) journalists and politicians would rather accept instead of challenge anti-immigration racist views (Keskinen, 2013; Horsti, 2015); the observation of a phlegmatic or accepting attitude was repeatedly brought up in the interviews. At the same time, Pii’s account speaks of a situation that does not correspond to the metanarrative of racism as a part of a defeated and condemned ideology (Goldberg, 2009; Lentin, 2016)—in other words, their articulation of exception implies there is no baseline against which phlegmatic or accepting attitudes can be called out.

The discrepancy between public portrayals of racism, and the antiracist analysis of a disaster, also characterises the way in which the interviewees articulate their own positions. When framing themselves, white interviewees involved in a group committed to antiracist online campaigning emphasised their middle-class or working-class ordinariness: ‘[as if] a common, ordinary person can’t be against racism’ or ‘we are conservative and very ordinary, absolutely’. Alternatively, interviewees from anarchist or radical groups held on to perceptions of their own marginality: ‘[the antiracist struggle] has been left in the hands of obscure, deep Green anarchist and Maoist gangs [like us]’. Within both positions, the emphasis on ordinariness, and disidentifying from the ordinary, imply that the interviewees do not find their antiracism to be supported in public debates, and in this sense, antiracism too becomes a disruption of the ordinary.

Both the regarding of ‘racists’ as interlocutors who influence the political climate (and who therefore should be denounced), as well as how exceptionality is attached to the ways in which the far and extreme right’s racism is tolerated in public debate, can be understood as challenges to white ordinariness. While this does not dismantle the white-centered focus of the narrative, it does hold white ordinariness responsible for, and intertwined with, extreme whiteness. However, as I will soon discuss more thoroughly, the mobilisation narrative that develops from an observation of a disaster at hand does not turn to address the surroundings and structures that possibly support the heightened presence of extreme whiteness. Instead, the story becomes about the antiracist confrontation of racists.

## **White antagonisms**

The mobilisation narrative is grounded in the aforementioned emergence of ‘racists’. This defines antiracism as a reactionary force (cf Pitcher, 2009), and antagonism between antiracists and racists characterises the narrative’s plot-structure in general, as the following examples demonstrate.

The interviews are replete with observations of ‘racists and fascists’, which speaks to antiracist activists’ devoted information-gathering on the far and extreme right, but also the central role these ‘villains’ play in the antiracist narrative—like in the following story, by interviewee Pasi. He speaks of an observation of racist harassment that transforms into a concern of broader extremist mobilisation. The way in which Pasi—a white, Finnish male in his 40s—explains what led him to

become active in a collective against right-wing populism, exemplifies how racist perpetrators provide an impetus for antiracism.

*For me, Finland has always been such a nice country that I've never needed to think about how things are here. But then, I remember, it was 2011 when I was – – there at a bus stop, I came across three young, younger than 15-year-old, Somali girls were being harassed by adult men – – it said 'Defence League' [on their clothing]. And I Googled what is Defence League and there, it opened that kind of world – – there's all that disgusting racist scum – – and I got worried about what is gonna happen to this country – – [I thought] if there's even a little I can do to stop these types of ideas from spreading, which made me start...*

First, Pasi's story repeats the temporal structure of exceptional and suddenly emerging racism, described previously. Simultaneously, for Pasi, the episode expands into threatening the future of the nation-state, which underscores his interpretation of the severity of the situation. The episode of adult men attacking children at a bus stop interrupts the status quo in 'nice' Finland, which serves as a supposedly neutral background to 'racist scum'. Pasi explains that witnessing adult men attack children—in his words, 'Somali girls'—leads him to track down an extreme right group known for their anti-Muslim racism, which in turn opens up an online world of 'racist scum'. The observed attack does not lead Pasi to take an interest in the attacked children's everyday reality, to but to focus on the perpetrators—the attacked children remain minor characters, as the focus is on confronting 'racists', instead of seeking solidarity with people who experience racism, for example. Pasi later explains that he became very invested in activities that call-out and mock the far right.

Pasi's privileging of the racist perpetrators shows how they appear as a precondition for stories of antiracist engagement, or, antiracism is dependent on what one interviewee called 'a concrete opposing side'. For several interviewees, racism became intelligible through the actions of 'racists'. A fellow member of the collective that Pasi belongs to, a white male in his 50s, explained that 'I was not that interested in racism before, but then I learned about these blog posts [by a known right-wing populist author]'. Another interviewee, a white, anarchist activist in their 20s, explained that 'what makes it [participation in antiracist activism] easier, is that there's that setting, that there are concrete enemies that aren't just abstract structures'. In other words, aligning against known 'enemies' was also seen to facilitate antiracist mobilisation—and in some cases, antiracism was described as depending on them. 'We were like, "Yes, now we get to practice antiracism!"' describes one white, male, middle-aged interviewee about the reaction of a group of young antiracists to which he used to belong, as they learned about school-bully skinheads in their town. Although the interviewee looks back to that instance with years-ago-enthusiasm, this anecdote underscores the logic of contemporary stories as well: as racism becomes intelligible through its perpetrators, antiracism is comprehensible against known 'racists'.

An antiracist focus on racist perpetrators resembles what has been maintained in previous research, namely that 'anti-racism typically imagines a clear and straightforward confrontation between racism and itself' (Pitcher, 2009, p. 12). As this confrontation becomes its central tenet, antiracism focuses on defending the border between extreme and ordinary whiteness, as evidenced by the following anecdote shared by one of the interviewees.

Maria, a white woman in her 30s, speaks of her experiences of being threatened after she publicly criticised one anti-immigration racist group, as part of the activities put forward by an antiracist collaborative initiative that united radical and moderate antiracists.

*I was called a toletard cunt – I’m quite used to that, it’s not the first time that I’ve received such a load of trash – I started to receive private messages, those were a bit worse, ‘die toletard cunt, I hope that immigrants will kill and rape you’, such things – But we turned this to our advantage in a way, that our [names a media outlet] made a story about me and [laughs] – [the threats I received] were in the title – [it showed that] they have got nothing on us.*

The insults Maria recounts make use of the portmanteau ‘toletard’<sup>v</sup>, from the growing derogative terminology that anti-immigration discussants have successfully launched in Finland. ‘Toletard’ aims to ridicule antiracists and liberal multiculturalists by undermining their cognitive capacities—directed at women, the term is often connected to sexualised threats. Maria further explains that the threats she received were exposed to the public in a media outlet sympathetic to antiracism. For her, this served to demonstrate the absurdity of attacking ‘toletards’. As such, Maria’s story underscores how challenging the extreme right might render all antiracists vulnerable (Mulinari and Neergaard, 2012). At the same time, it can be argued that the reactionary strategy that focuses on what is said about ‘toletards’ centralises white vulnerability. First, Maria became involved in the conflict because of her critique of the racist views of one anti-immigration racist group. However, what then becomes the actual story is the conflict between racists and antiracists.

While the sexualised threats Maria received exploit a racist stereotype of ‘the immigrant man’ as a likely rapist, the stereotype and its possible effects on actual people scapegoated by this stereotype seem to be a secondary concern in the tug-of-war between ‘racists’ and ‘toletards’. When engaging and falsifying the message put forward by the ‘racists’ becomes the primary concern of Maria and her group, the agency and views of ‘immigrants’ become sidelined. This underscores an implicit assumption of a context in which participation in political debate is primarily reserved for those recognised as Finns. Through focusing on a racism versus antiracism confrontation, Maria’s story affirms rather than unpacks the default deference to white ordinariness and extreme whiteness.

## **“Out of the ordinary”**

Although the explored antiracist initiatives are not exclusively white, the stories shared in the data mainly portray a white-normed reality—similar plot-structures and emphasis on key events are cited by both white interviewees and interviewees of colour. The main characters, as well as the general focus in the explored narratives, are situated within whiteness—for instance, the aforementioned ‘immigrants’ and ‘Somali girls’ are assigned the role of minor characters, while being the objects of racism. However this kind of white ordinariness is firstly challenged by some interviewees’ of colour accounts of their own participation, and secondly, in reflections by some of the white interviewees.

Lauri, a white male interviewee in his 40s, envisions future antiracist activities in the following way.

*Another thing is that these immigrants, they are no victims. I know many people who could be mobilised to join some kind of counter-action – – they are good guys who are coming, they are not just coming here to sit on their hands and look what is going on. At some point, they will start to react too.*

The account describes antiracism as a form of counter-action, in which ‘immigrants’ are recognised as inhabiting the role of the victim. Critiquing this, Lauri’s points out that ‘immigrants’ are not passive bystanders but potential contributors. In other words, he reformulates the narrative in which ‘immigrant’ agency plays a role. At the same time, the envisioned narrative of people ‘who are coming’ and who ‘at some point’ may become active implicitly relies on an image of a homogenous white Finland, where ‘immigrants’ are always newcomers.

Another interviewee, Leyla, a hijab-wearing woman of colour in her 20s, redefines both the narrative’s point of emphasis, and the way in which its characters are regarded.

*Many antiracists are Finnish, and they’re focusing on being against racism. But then, these racists, they want to know about sharia law and Islam so much, and so on. And I think many anarchists don’t know about it [Islam] – – so we have to defend ourselves and explain how things really are. Because, if I don’t say it, and the Finnish people don’t know what to say or they’re not able to respond, who then clarifies these arguments?*

First, Leyla distinguishes between the focus of ‘being against racism’—directly challenging blatantly racist views—and defending oneself against racialising conceptions of Islam—‘explaining how things really are’. In her view, ‘Finnish’ antiracists are not necessarily able to dismantle false beliefs about Islam, or the racialising of Muslims. Her view also implies that dismantling racialising views of Muslims does not appear as a normative stance in society, and further, dismantling racialisation is not (sufficiently) incorporated into the antiracist agenda. In other words, she describes a landscape of whiteness as ordinariness that is not defeated simply by ‘being against racism’ or opposing extremist racist views, but in which whiteness also conditions antiracist agency. At the same time, ‘being against racism’ matches the general antagonistic narrative that focuses on singling out an immediate racist threat, and that leaves limited space to conceive of racism beyond the acts of ‘racists and fascists’. By explicating the need to dismantle racist beliefs and by emphasising the role of people subjected to those beliefs as antiracist actors, Leyla underscores the importance of also challenging white ordinariness in antiracist action.

## Conclusion

I have explored stories articulated by grassroots antiracist activists in Finland regarding their activism against the far and extreme right’s racism. I have shown that that the identified mobilisation narrative begins with a description of a natural-disaster-like state of exception, critiques the lack of broadly recognised antiracist narratives, and focuses on the conflict between racist perpetrators and white antiracists, which results in people who experience racism becoming sidelined. At the same time, the data examined here also provides some examples through which this focus is re-narrated in a manner that recognises diverse positionalities within antiracist mobilisation.

Discussion about empirical findings through a critical whiteness theorising framework underscores the distinct degrees to which dangerous extreme whiteness and supposedly innocent white ordinariness (Dyer, 1997; Lawler, 2012) are distinguished in the narrative. The analysis illustrates that the possibilities to observe racism beyond extremist deeds (cf Gilroy, 1990; Lentin, 2016; Pitcher, 2009; Goldberg, 2009) are connected to the ways in which the assumed boundaries between whiteness as ordinariness, and extreme whiteness, are perceived. The elements of the narrative that underscore extreme whiteness as a separate entity from white ordinariness (disaster-like change; antagonistic plot-structure) feed into conceptions of racism as an exception. At the same time, an interpretation of a porous boundary between two supposedly distinct modes of whiteness opens up possibilities for reformulating and even dismantling white ordinariness. Firstly, the demand for a more broadly recognised antiracist narrative portrays white ordinariness as complicit within extreme whiteness, and secondly, redefining the focus and agencies in the antiracist narrative enables the questioning of white normativity.

In sum, despite the fact that defining racism through extremes contains the risk of reproducing racialising hierarchies, the antiracism that strives to dismantle the far and extreme right's racism does not necessarily negate the challenges caused by those hierarchies. Furthermore, the metanarrative of European racism as a supposedly defeated ideology can be employed strategically in a context like Finland, where the disavowal of extremist racism has not been incorporated into societal metanarratives. Simultaneously, my analysis on extreme and ordinariness, and their interconnectedness, stresses the importance of approaching the far and extreme right's successful dissemination of anti-immigration racism in connection to broader racialising structures (cf Hübinette & Lundström, 2011; Keskinen, 2013). Future scholarship looking into the spread of anti-immigration racism, for instance, can benefit from interrogating the distinct aspects of whiteness in order to grasp the phenomenon as a part of historical continuities of racism.

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<sup>i</sup> ‘Radical’ refers to approaches according to which ‘the system is the problem’ (Andrews, 2018, 13), while ‘moderate’ approaches adopt more conformist views on the societal structures.



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<sup>ii</sup> Fifteen of the interviewees were men—the rest identified as women or gender minorities. The interviewees came from various backgrounds, however, the majority had a tertiary education or were studying for one. The interviewees' ages varied from 18 to 60.

<sup>iii</sup> This is also well documented in academic research, for instance in Keskinen (2013) and Horsti (2015).

<sup>iv</sup> All quotations from the data are the author's translations from Finnish.

<sup>v</sup> *Suvakki* from *suvaista* [tolerate], and *vajakki* [retard]. One of the interviewees also connected the term to *punikki*, which roughly translates to 'commie', in connection to the Finnish civil war.